

2022

On Operations: Operational Art and Military Disciplines

Edmund B. Hernandez

B. A. Friedman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Hernandez, Edmund B. and Friedman, B. A. (2022) "On Operations: Operational Art and Military Disciplines," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 75: No. 3, Article 13.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss3/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

earlier. The fact that the former are not as easily listed as the latter demonstrates that Novo and Parker are offering more-complex and -nuanced lessons than those they replaced. Aside from these big takeaways, the book has some smaller but no less compelling ideas. Specifically, Novo and Parker point out that, despite what Archidamus, king of Sparta, and Pericles, “first citizen” of Athens, repeatedly say (and what the Naval War College repeatedly teaches), navies were far easier to replace than armies (p. 75). They also quite persuasively dispute the Sicilian expedition’s similarities to the Vietnam War (pp. 37–38, 147), another long-standing Naval War College truism. Unfortunately, the authors sometimes are guilty of the very sins they catalog. First, some of their myth busting seems more like hair splitting. For example, they point out that Athens was not a sea power because “strictly speaking, as a metropolitan area” Athens lacked access to the sea (p. 102)—but surely a distance of six miles from acropolis to port does not dictate disqualification as a sea power. Second, they take several incidents out of context, or they ascribe links between events that just are not present in Thucydides. For example, they imply that Thucydides was shocked that Sparta did not break the Peace of Nicias after Melos was reduced, but the quote they cite describes Spartan reaction (or lack thereof) to Athenian raids in the Peloponnesus (p. 115), not the sack of Melos. Finally, on several occasions they mischaracterize secondary sources as representing Thucydides, or speeches from Thucydides as the author’s own views (p. 83). The end result is that rather than add nuance to an oversimplified claim such as “fifth-century Greece was bipolar,” they merely

replace it with an equally oversimplified claim such as “fifth-century Greece was *not* bipolar,” despite having presented many diverse and compelling points of view that fifth-century Greece was a more complicated state than a simple label would suggest (pp. 50–53).

I recognize that I may not be the target audience for this book. I am fluent in ancient Greek; I have read Thucydides multiple times, as literature, translation material, history, and political science; and I already am familiar with most of the books and articles the authors cite. In contrast, for a reader who knows Thucydides only through Graham Allison or from pithy misquotations and misattributions, this book may provide alternative perspectives. While I agree with Novo and Parker’s exhortation to use Thucydides “as a beginning not as an end” (p. 171), readers who are unfamiliar with Thucydides but wish to understand this important work still should approach *Restoring Thucydides* with caution.

JOSHUA HAMMOND



On Operations: Operational Art and Military Disciplines, by B. A. Friedman. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021. 256 pages. \$31.95.

On Operations is B. A. Friedman’s examination of the origins of the operational level of war, operational art, and the military general staff and of their impact on U.S. military thinking, doctrine, and way of war. His ambitious work has two aims. First, he advocates strongly for the removal of the concept of the operational level of war from U.S. doctrine. Second, he seeks to improve the value and use of operational art by military staffs in organizing tactical actions to attain strategic

results. Although the pieces as a whole are thought provoking for practitioners and planners, the book suffers from two notable shortfalls. In his pursuit of the first aim—removing the operational level of war from military thinking—he at times appears to paint theory and doctrine as excessively dogmatic. In addressing the second aim—enhancing the use of operational art—his points, while persuasive at times, would have been stronger overall had they provided further elaboration on the planning efficacy that would be achieved by using a paradigm with no operational level.

Friedman organizes his work into seventeen chapters and provides five case studies to help illustrate his own theory of operational art. In his introductory chapter he meticulously lays out the case for bifurcating the operational level of war from operational art, then removing the operational-level concept from U.S. military thinking altogether while retaining operational art. He presents his evidence against the operational level first by outlining the arguments opposing its abolishment. In the five subsequent chapters he reinforces his position by covering the historical origins and application of the operational level in German, Soviet, and U.S. military thinking, and discusses the nature of a healthy civil-military relationship.

Friedman shifts his focus in the remaining chapters and proffers a set of principles for operational art by organizing war-fighting functions into six disciplines. He dedicates a chapter to each of the six: administration, information, operations, fire support, logistics, and command and control. Finally, five case studies covering Austerlitz, Königgrätz, the Atlantic campaign, the Battle of Britain, and Operation WATCHTOWER

(Guadalcanal) are offered to illustrate the utility of these operational disciplines.

Friedman argues that the concept of an operational level of war, and consequently the levels themselves, has no place in U.S. military thinking and must be removed. He asserts that the adoption of the operational level as part of U.S. doctrine was the result of a misinterpretation of German and Soviet operational thought. Further, he claims that there is an underlying lack of supporting logic for the purpose of the operational level as being the link between tactics and strategy. According to Friedman, the various definitions of the operational level are contradictory and nebulous in the literature and cannot be linked to the long-established concepts of tactics and strategy. He warns that the consequences of an operational level interposed between tactics and strategy will continue to be damaging to contemporary military planning.

Friedman advocates strongly for the retention and application of operational art and for a military general staff to serve as its executor. According to Friedman, flawed doctrine and military thinking have resulted in an incorrect understanding of the operational level and a resultant conflation of it with operational art, causing the latter to be marginalized. He firmly establishes that operational art has merit once it is separated from the operational level. He explores the rise of the military staff in applying operational art to manage the conduct of war, and he suggests a modernized version of the Scharnhorst model of a general staff as an exemplar. This professional staff, knowledgeable in the practice of operational art, capably can support the commander. It is the general staff and its application of operational art, not the

concept of an operational level of war, that effectively support the tactics-and-strategy dialectic, in turn serving to manage the complexities of modern warfare.

Unfortunately, Friedman's argument paints a picture of the concepts underpinning military theory and doctrine as being static and unchanging. Yet military theory is not static, and doctrine changes under the pressures of experience and critical thinking to provide pragmatic utility. No theory or doctrine should be dogmatic, especially in the conduct of war, and this truism applies to the concept of the operational level of war as well. Even though it was wrongly adopted into doctrine, the concept of an operational level of war has evolved beyond its original formulation. In the absence of addressing directly the interrelationships among levels, related objectives, and operational art itself, his argument is left weaker than it could have been. As long as there is utility to be found in applying any concept to create and execute military plans effectively, that concept has a purpose in military thinking and should be retained.

On Operations outlines a way to understand and manage war. The work is ambitious and covers significant territory in roughly two hundred pages. This work will generate controversy among practitioners of operational planning—who, in fact, should be challenged to justify the value and existence of the operational-level-of-war concept. Friedman's work adds to the body of military thinking about operational art and the operational level of war. It should appeal to military staffs, and planners in particular, who desire to widen their professional knowledge about operational art and the theory and doctrine that support it.

EDMUND B. HERNANDEZ



Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age, by Stephen R. Platt. New York: Knopf, 2018. 592 pages. \$17.

In modern Chinese history, few subjects are discussed as widely and misunderstood as broadly as the so-called Century of Humiliation, which ostensibly commenced with China's defeat in the First Opium War (1839–42). Most academic analyses of the Century of Humiliation's genesis emphasize economic and technological disparities, inevitable clashes of contrasting civilizations, or, broadly, the tide of European imperialism. Historian Stephen Platt, however, has sought to examine the prelude to the Opium War comprehensively through the eyes of the individuals who drove early Anglo-Chinese relations.

Imperial Twilight is concerned not with the Opium War itself but with how it came to occur. Platt posits two essential questions along which he aligns his work. The first examines how Britain came to fight a war with China for the sake of merchants who were trafficking illegal drugs, despite visceral domestic opposition. The second seeks to determine how China declined from its peerless geopolitical position in the eighteenth century and, in turn, how Britain came to take advantage of that decline. Within this framework, Platt examines the early history of Anglo-Chinese trade and diplomatic relations, beginning with the establishment of the canton system in 1759 and ending in the aftermath of the Opium War. At the same time, Platt relates the various internal crises faced by the Qing Empire, from the White Lotus Rebellion to rampant piracy in China's southern littoral.